



LOWELL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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MEMORANDUM

To: Jim Hall, Chief Operating Officer
From: John Descoteaux, Transportation Director
Date: March 29, 2021
Ref: Transportation Update

Recommendation: The School Committee expand its COVID-19 transportation policy for SY2020/2021 to allow for the busing of students in Grades K-8 who live within 1.75 miles of their school.

DESE Guidance: On February 11, 2021, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) issued a memo updating the physical distance guidelines on school buses stating:

*"In all cases, maximum distance between students should be maintained during boarding and transportation. Capacity limitations and physical distancing requirements for students on buses are **lifted**. Keep windows open at all times during operation at least two inches. Students should be assigned to a single bus and a particular seat. This will limit potential exposure and make contact tracing easier to conduct."*

Based upon this updated guidance from DESE, the Transportation Department estimates that 52 middle school and 77 elementary students would be able to be transported on each individual bus to-and-from their respective schools.

Rationale:

The current policy approved at the beginning of the school year allows for the transportation of students in Grades 1-6 who live within 2 miles of their school. This policy was set after consideration of the risks of busing and the need for social distancing. In comparison, the

SY2019/2020 policy allowed for K-4 students who lived within .75 miles of their school to be bused and 5-8 students who lived within 1.5 miles of their school to be bused.

At the last School Committee meeting, it was reported that Lowell Public Schools was presently transporting approximately one thousand students in grades one through six who reside two (2) miles or more from their home to school utilizing thirty-five (35) school buses. I anticipated that an additional one thousand student students could be transported beginning April 5, 2021 utilizing the thirty-five (35) school buses in Grades 1-6.

The School Committee asked that the Transportation Department review the routing and requests for busing and see if more students could be accommodated. In consideration of the School Committee's feedback at the last School Committee meeting, I again reviewed the routes and the locations of the students returning to school on April 5, 2021. I determined that we could expand to offer busing for students who are in Grades K, 7, 8 and reducing the mileage from 2 miles to 1.75 miles. These changes resulted in 42 buses being utilized instead of 35 that I had initially estimated.

I looked at what it would take to go down to 1.5 miles and the numbers are not currently possible given the need for some social distancing. If the school committee reduced down to 1.5 miles, we would need 15-20 more buses. There are not enough buses available to safely expand to this level. It is possible that we may be able to bring on more students or expand in the upcoming weeks, but time is needed to reconcile the number of students and routes and see who does and does not accept busing. With confirmed data, a more thorough analysis can be completed to reflect the district's ability to return to prior years' mileage requirements and support the students safe return to school.

Recommendation:

After weighing the risks and benefits of expanding transportation, I recommend the policy be adjusted to allow those in Grades K-8 to be bused if they live within 1.75 miles of their school.

This reduces the mileage requirement by .25 miles and also adds Grades K, 7, and 8.